

Moving Organizations Toward Gender Equity:
A Cautionary Tale

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Lotte Bailyn and Rhona Rapoport

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This chapter is a narrative of a collaborative interactive action research project in which work-family was used as a channel for organizational change towards increased gender equity. It does not deal with family-friendly benefits or programs which, though helpful to those who use them (primarily women with small children), can also unwittingly create inequities among employees.

The story begins by looking at what led up to the project, what actually happened in part of the project, and some issues about our way of working. It ends by raising some larger societal issues.

Background

The project grew out of the Ford Foundation's Women's Program and its Women's Program Forum (established in 1986) which allowed the national and international donor community to discuss issues related to women's programs. In 1989 the Forum provided an opportunity to examine the current debates and possible responses to the growing needs of men and women for "balancing" their work and family responsibilities. These events, together with work on the Ford Foundation's own work-family program, reaffirmed that women were not being treated equitably with men in the workplace. Not only was there pay inequity but there also was inequitable mobility in work careers, continued gender stereotyping, and -- important for our purposes -- disincentives to using work-family programs and policies in ways that could decrease the inequities. Even in organizations that had well developed work-family policies and benefits, men and women were inequitably treated -- mainly by default. Such organizations were also losing the women whom they wanted to keep and thus began to realize that the work-family programs they had developed were not

achieving the intended consequences. It became clear that to increase gender equity in organizations, it is important that both men and women are enabled to achieve better "balances" or integration of their needs and responsibilities in the workplace, in their domestic units, and in society.

The implication of this was -- and is -- that workplaces have to take on integration of work-family issues for men and women as a strategic set of business concerns. Such a stance is quite contrary to the historical separation of work and family life since the industrial revolution in which family concerns have been considered outside the purview of workplaces and gender equity merely a matter of opening employment opportunities to women. It is also contrary to the attempt by companies to introduce family benefits and to evolve into "family-friendly" organizations. Such work-family policies and programs, introduced to support women with children who wanted to work or work more, are helpful to those who need the benefits. But they create inequities because they do not deal with the work situation. In contrast, our approach assumes that it is also necessary to change the structure and culture of workplaces, paying attention to both men's and women's roles. To achieve this involves "breaking the mold" of existing ways and developing new corporate structures and cultures. Not an easy task. It is the very unexpected nature of our approach that makes this not a story of easy success, but a cautionary tale.

It was with these concerns in mind that the Ford Foundation agreed to fund a collaborative interactive action research project whose ultimate aim was to develop approaches to increasing gender equity in American workplaces. Three corporations and three action research teams agreed to work together towards this aim. The companies were all leaders in the work-family field. Together with the researchers, they agreed:

to explore interconnections of current work-family policies and practices with other aspects of human resource policies, work structures, and corporate culture;

to identify barriers to implementing work-family policies in a gender-equitable way, including gender stereotypes, constraints on men and women at different life phases, and the way work is organized;

to develop new practices to overcome these barriers in ways consonant with and integral to overall business objectives; and

to document the processes involved for broad public dissemination by various methods.

In this chapter we present part of the case study of what happened at one of these companies -- the Xerox Corporation -- in response to this agreement.¹ But first, we present the evidence that links work-family concerns to gender, and explain how the division of work and family into separate, gendered, and adversarial spheres works against gender equity and also may not be in the best interest of organizations.

Relation to Gender²

While the difficulty of integrating work and family appears to be gender neutral, we found that, because of gender roles and expectations, its effects on men and women are often different. For example, requests for ad hoc, emergency flexibility have few career implications for those -- mostly men -- whose family needs are temporary and short-term. On the other hand, reward systems that value "face time" and perfect attendance have significant career consequences for those -- usually, at present, women -- who have routine, on-going family responsibilities and must end work at regular hours or use sick days to care for others.

¹ Others who worked with us at Xerox were Deborah M. Kolb, Joyce K. Fletcher, Maureen Harvey, Susan Eaton, Robin Johnson, and Leslie Perlow.

² This section is based on an analysis and text by Joyce K. Fletcher. See also Re-linking work and family: A catalyst for organizational change. Sloan School Working Paper #3892-96, April 1996.

In the same vein, expectations that women are, or should be, "family primary" tend to see women as unfit for the demands of organizational life. As a result, some women -- especially those in professional or managerial positions -- feel they have to hide their families. Thus, while men have family pictures on their desks, these women keep their desks clear of all family reminders. Indeed, one of the compliments frequently paid high-achieving women is that "you'd never even know she had a child." In other words, just as family-friendly policies aren't gender neutral in their effect, neither are the demands of organizational life.

And although it is less politically correct than it used to be to suggest that women belong in the home and men belong at work, we found these attitudes and beliefs are still alive and seriously influence organizational practices. The deeply held, but not often expressed, belief that society works best when women stay at home and men go to work, creates real problems for people who step out of ascribed gender roles. For example, when women do make the choice to focus primarily on work, there may actually be negative career consequences. One divisional manager, in explaining why one woman had failed a management review process, said: "She probably thought it would be seen as positive that she was willing to sacrifice her family for work. But she has gone through two divorces and who knows who is taking care of those kids...that's not the kind of person we admire." These women are caught in a classic double bind: the work culture expects them to subordinate families but punishes them for doing it.

When men try to step out of expected gender roles, they also experience a double bind. Although it is possible for them to be acclaimed for taking on some short-term family responsibility, it is far more difficult for them to use family policies for any long term arrangements. Managers who decide what requests for flexibility can be accommodated, often make these decisions based on need. Assumptions about gender roles make it very difficult for men to make a strong case based on need and many told us that they don't even try

because they believe these long term accommodations are, in reality, available only to women. As one technical supervisor notes: "Men here are seen as wimps by senior management if they talk about their desire to spend time with their families." Thus, men who want to be more involved in family and community and to share more of these responsibilities face significant organizational constraints in achieving this goal. Integrating work and family, then, is a different experience for women and men, presenting different challenges and different organizational obstacles. In sum, the cultural separation of work and family by gender and the narrow organizational definition of what constitutes a work-family need unfairly hinder women while seeming to support them, and do not legitimate men's concerns while maintaining a myth of their ideal worker status.

Although both men and women spoke poignantly of the pain and unfairness of having to choose between career and family, we found most do not challenge the gender roles that encourage men to be career primary and women to be family primary. Indeed, these gender roles tend to be accepted at a very deep, often unconscious level. One young man, for example, who is on the fast track spoke of how he wants to spend more time with his two young children but fears that if he is ever going to provide for them he will have to make the same choice his father did and sacrifice time with them to focus on his career. His sense of the appropriate masculine role seems to dictate that if forced to make a choice it will have to be career. And one young woman who had just passed up a promotion spoke of how "unreasonable" it was for her to even think of taking the job. As she put it, "I chose to have three kids. I couldn't possibly do that job and stay sane. I chose to have these kids and now I have to take care of them. It's just not reasonable to take on a job like that with kids this age." Her view of herself as a woman, and the current options open to her seem to mean that she has to choose family. Thus women are unfairly constrained in their ability to achieve in the workplace and men are unfairly constrained in their ability to achieve in the family.

Our project challenged these deeply held assumptions that success -- organizational, individual, and societal -- lies in keeping the work and family spheres separate and distinct, and as necessarily a trade-off with each other. Strategically linking these spheres and viewing them as complementary, provide an alternative vision of an ideal worker, a successful organization, and a functional, equitable society. For example, at one of our sites we challenged the image of the ideal worker by documenting the work practices of "integrated" individuals -- people who are able, despite the cultural imperative to the contrary, to link these two arenas.³ Our documentation of these people's work practices (many of whom were women) found that they used skills more often associated with the private, domestic sphere of life, such as sharing, nurturing, collaborating, and attending to the emotional context of situations. Since these are less valued and often invisible in the workplace or considered inappropriate to it, we created a language of competence to talk about these activities and the relational skills they required. We showed that linking these skills to those more strongly associated with, and more valued by, the public sphere of economic activity, such as rationality, linear thinking, autonomy, and independence, offers a new vision of an ideal worker as one who combines these characteristics.

We also question the assumption that society depends on the two spheres being separate and gendered. In fact, when we conducted surveys to determine the extent of work-"family" issues we found that at the level of individual experience, the assumption of separate spheres is anyway more a myth than a reality. At every site, men and women recounted the ways in which their lives are interdependent blends of work and family, and of their desire to have good careers and good families. Some workers -- because of their position, their financial resources, or their being defined as valuable employees -- are able, at

³ See Joyce K. Fletcher. A feminist reconstruction of work. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 7 (1998), 163-186.

times, to manage this boundary on their own. The rest, including many working class women and men and people of color, simmer with discontent. In all cases, energy and loyalty are diverted unnecessarily from the organization.

In our project, as seen below, we challenged the assumption that work and family have to be entirely separate spheres by "pushing back" with individuals who cast these as issues of personal choice and by pointing out the ways in which they are interdependent and connected. For example, with one management team we pointed out that by selecting as "top employees" only those who had skills associated with the public sphere -- mostly male -- they were inadvertently undermining the kind of skills and kind of team-oriented worker their corporate vision statement professed to need. With the manager who criticized the female employee for sacrificing family for her career, we pointed out that it is the organizational definition of commitment and the image of the "ideal worker" that is the problem. Expecting someone in a management review process to represent herself as someone other than this type of worker is unrealistic. Furthermore, to the extent that this definition of commitment has negative consequences for society -- i.e. divorce, neglected children -- managers and organizations have some responsibility to bear.

The Xerox Experiments

Our first interaction with Xerox was with a central group of HR people in the corporation, augmented by a senior line manager soon to become VP of Human Resources, though we did not know this at the time. In working with this group we initially followed the quality method⁴ that had been institutionalized at the company during the 1980s. In this process there was an initial tension between those in the organization who were concerned about the provision of better

⁴ These were procedures -- typical of total quality management (TQM) -- designed to help groups solve quality problems in a rational and well specified manner. See David T. Kearns and David A. Nadler, Prophets in the dark: How Xerox reinvented itself and beat back the Japanese. New York: HarperBusiness, 1992.

work-family policies and programs, and our view, supported by the senior line manager, that better policies on their own would not help (theirs were already quite generous on paper) and that we needed to look at the work itself and how it is accomplished. After an interesting and illuminating day of discussion we came out with the following description of a current and desired state:

Current State: The culture and structure of the organization unnecessarily creates conflict between work and family. This has negative consequences for the business and for the equitable treatment of employees.

Desired State: The culture and structure capitalizes on work-family issues as an opportunity to create innovative, productive, and equitable work practices in the organization.

Two things are important about this formulation. First, it takes us away from policies that help primarily women and emphasizes, instead, the culture surrounding work. And second, it substitutes for the either-or thinking of the current state, i.e. that work and family are necessarily adversarial, the notion that it is possible to create a culture that uses work-family issues as a way of making work practices more productive, while at the same time being more gender equitable. This is quite a change from the current way of thinking.

Another aspect of that initial contact is also important. Our goal, as stated, was to use work-family concerns as a means to achieve a more gender equitable workplace. Gender equity was our ultimate goal. It quickly became apparent, however, that it would not be useful to use the term "gender equity" in our dealings with work sites. Its connotation seemed to be a mixture of pay equity and sexual harassment, both of which are legal issues and hence made the company very nervous.⁵ Gender issues, therefore, went underground, though,

⁵When we talk of gender equity, we refer to issues that concern women and men. This is not only a women's issue. Men have gender, just as women do; as whites have race just as blacks do. Men's over-identification with work and occupation as a source of self-esteem feeds gender inequity just as does the presumption that women alone are responsible for family and community. Our sense of an equitable society is one where each sex depends for its sense of worth and identity on both spheres; where people and families regard the distribution of

as will become clear, they played a significant role in our findings and our work at the company had an impact on the way some people thought about gender. Publicly, however, we were there to work collaboratively with work sites in order to see whether it would be possible to design different ways of working that would not hurt the business and still allow people to have a better integration between their work lives and their personal lives. In our minds, though not in those of our action partners, "work-family" was a proxy for gender equity. It stood for the concrete, immediate, and "reachable" aspects of the work situation that connected the expectations, incentives, and assumptions about how work must be accomplished with the difficulty of achieving gender equity in the workplace.

Two beliefs underlie the methods we used. First, we were concerned to get at what really mattered to people and our methods of data collection reflect this. And second, we also believe that obtaining data the way we did acts as an intervention. Indeed, as already alluded to by our use of "push-backs," we saw these early interventions on our part as an important beginning to the changes we hoped to be able to introduce in the organization.

Together with our initial liaison group, we jointly devised a series of criteria for the selection of sites to work on, which were then negotiated by our company partners with the managers involved. Once on site, we had to start the collaboration all over again with the managers and human resource people of that site. Our first site was a product development division. We began our work there by interviewing managers and engineers and by observing them in meetings and in following them around during the work day. We were interested in the details of their work: what they did, how they did it, whom they worked with, etc. We also discussed with them their personal and family situations. We tried to surface the covert assumptions that people were

operating with, and in the individual interviews we were able to get people to talk about taboo topics.

As already indicated, we started the project with the belief that there was a significant correlation between people's personal lives and their experiences at work, and that this somehow related to the issue of gender equity, but how it worked we were not sure. Our first analysis, and first feedback to management, dealt primarily with the work situation. We described the work culture as highly individualistic, as valuing the problem solving aspects of the work while ignoring coordination and problem prevention needs, and as oriented to long hours and face time -- to "throwing time at problems." We also had discovered, and reported, that women engineers were not comfortable in this situation, and a number were thinking of leaving and finding work elsewhere.

The initial reaction of management was informative. They did not see the "work-family" connection of what we were saying and they did not consider us experts on work process. Hence they were not convinced that our analysis of the work situation was valid. But as we talked more with individual managers and explained the connections we were beginning to make, some began to see things in a different light. One manager in particular, who had not been at our joint meeting and with whom we therefore met individually to go over our results, saw the "revolutionary" character of what we were saying. He was also able to make a connection to gender issues. It was he who explained to the vice president that telling a woman manager that she is valued and that one understands that she has to leave at 5:30 even though a meeting is continuing, is actually discrimination because it implies that her input is not necessary. Only stopping the meeting, he asserted, would be equitable. It was at this site, also, that the previously mentioned analysis of alternative ways of working was made.

The experimental intervention tried with the software engineers in one particular product development team, emerged from an interactive and collaborative attempt to find something that would lessen the number of hours

and the stress they were under, while at the same time helping (rather than hindering) their ability to meet a very tight production schedule with limited resources.⁶ Our initial suggestion was to limit the work week artificially to some pre-specified number: perhaps 40 or 50 hours of work. The thought was that under those conditions the group would still get their work done, but would do so in a more efficient manner, working smart rather than long. This was turned down summarily as impossible, given the highly ambitious, though many thought unrealistic schedule that had been set for the group. Further analysis of why the long hours seemed so necessary showed that the engineers needed evening and weekend time to finish their individual deliverables -- for which they were rewarded -- because of the continuous interruptions during the normal work day. These interruptions, it turned out, consisted of both absolutely necessary interactions in order to coordinate the work (e.g. working with each other, having meetings, etc.) and unproductive encounters, consisting often of managers asking for information and requiring elaborate presentations of how the work was proceeding. Moreover, even the necessary interactions were not always urgent, i.e. they could be postponed to a time that was less disruptive to the engineers' individual work. On the basis of this analysis, the group decided to experiment with a restructuring of their day into periods of independent work (quiet times) and periods of interdependent or interactive work. The result was a real win-win: it gave the engineers (and the managers) more control over their time and actually got the product to market on time.

This experiment was critical in a number of ways. First, it is clear that no individual accommodation to a particular person's time needs could have achieved this result. It had to be a collective decision, and had to be followed by all in the group in order to help an individual engineer. Second, the main learning that ensued stemmed from the new understanding the engineers arrived

⁶ For a full description of this experiment and its analysis, see Leslie Perlow, Finding time: How corporations, individuals, and families can benefit from new work practices. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

at about the nature of their work and the effect they have on each other. Since they could not interrupt each other during quiet times, they learned to plan their work in more strategic ways: they learned to distinguish between necessary interactions and unproductive interruptions, and they became aware of their interdependencies, and the effect they were having on each other's work. In other words, they learned to work more effectively, and by doing so they got the product out while at the same time easing the time and pressure crunch they were under.

At another site, a customer administration center, the issues were quite different. This was a group of workers who interacted with customers by means of computers, scheduling installations and service, billing, and performing other administrative tasks. Not a professional work force, these employees were highly dependent on their jobs for the financial support of themselves and their families. Long hours were not the problem here, indeed days were regimented into a typical 9-5 routine, with a careful count of tardiness and absences. What was difficult for these workers was the rigidity of these schedules. Commutes were long, and family obligations sometimes made this time table difficult to reach, with serious career consequences for those who were late or absent too often. Not surprisingly, it was the women employees who most often were caught in this bind.

Company policies to deal with such issues were generous. All kinds of flexibilities were available on the books: flextime, compressed work week, etc. In fact, though, very few people were taking advantage of these opportunities. Through analysis of the initial set of interviews, we surfaced a culture of individualism and control which not only prevented people from receiving permission for flexible schedules, and therefore stopped them from even asking for them, but which also affected the entire way in which the organization worked. Managers, for example, felt they had personally to supervise all their people or the work would not get done. The few people who did come earlier or stay later (the only form of flexibility that was used at all), therefore, meant

that managers' days were necessarily lengthened. And those few who were given this permission, were seen as especially needy, i.e. were women with small children, with the result that others not only did not ask for such permission but felt keenly that the system was unfair.

Our feedback of this analysis to management and then to the group as a whole led to an intriguing result. At first resistant to the interpretation we had made, during the full group meeting, the division manager impulsively decided to permit an experiment: everyone could go on any flexible schedule they wanted to, as long as the work got done. This dramatic announcement to the whole division, which occurred spontaneously and had not been shared with any of his direct reports, led to a number of remarkable developments. First, almost everyone -- men and women, with children or without, single or partnered -- expressed an interest in a flexible schedule. Second, the supervisors, who had been the ones negotiating individually with anyone who asked to use these policies, found it impossible to continue in this manner and had to change their approach. They had to let their people collectively decide how to get the work done and how to fit that in with their desired work schedules. What this meant, finally, was that the groups began to function as self-managed teams, which had been a key business goal in the site but which had previously eluded them.

The bottom lines of this experimental intervention were numerous: a 30% drop in absenteeism; increased customer service through elongated hours; realization by managers that their people could work independently and did not need their continuous surveillance; much eased personal pressure on many employees; an increased sense of fairness across gender and family status lines. And it all depended on a new collective understanding and legitimation of all employees' (regardless of gender or family situation) personal lives.

Discussion

These are some of the examples of what happened when we tried to use work-family issues as a catalyst for changes in work practices that would make the workplace more gender equitable. Since then we have worked in many other organizations and have continued to learn about what it takes to move organizations toward gender equity. And we have come to a number of conclusions.

First, it is not easy. Beliefs about gender are deeply entrenched in the social fabric, and the extent to which they are embedded in work structures and cultures is generally unrecognized. To change an organization to be more gender equitable, therefore, engages layers of feelings and beliefs that are usually not necessary in other kinds of organizational change. Not only does this make change more difficult, but it also makes it likely that the old cultural assumptions reabsorb the changes, with the result that the gender goals get lost. This has happened to us in a number of instances, and we are still working on how to keep the change process aligned with the gender objectives.

Second, because of this embedding, the methods necessary to make progress in this area are a complicated interplay of intervention, analysis, and partnership. We have called what we do collaborative, interactive, action research (CIAR). All elements, we feel, must occur together. Briefly, this is what we mean by each of these elements:⁷

collaborative: we collaborate throughout with our partners on the sites; this means we are co-learners with them; both of us have expertise which is mutually acknowledged and the emphasis shifts from one side to the other (what Joyce Fletcher calls fluid expertise)

interactive: out of the interactions with our partners comes something new: new issues, unexpected resolutions; there are no pre-determined outcomes of these interactions; we all share a goal but not necessarily the same perceptions and need not accept each other's frames

⁷ These understandings have been worked out in collaboration with Joyce K. Fletcher.

action: the method involves actually doing a demonstration project which has face validity for the organization; it must be connected to an actual task that the work group is doing and accountable for; hence it requires a local site, not an organization as a whole; it must stay close to the actual work that is being done

research: an integral part of the process is the analysis of initial data -- this analysis is a conceptual task, and done by the researchers to be shared with and elaborated on collaboratively; it is a seeking for new knowledge in the process; it is looking at the data through a gender lens, i.e. seeking the gender implications in the data and surfacing the assumptions that underlie work practices that have gender implications

As is obvious from the above, these methods are neither those of traditional research on organizations nor are they the traditional ways of bringing about organizational change. But they are necessary, we believe, if the changes now occurring in organizations are to lead to greater gender equity.

Finally, in the long run, we have to move beyond the workplace if we wish for a truly equitable society. The workplace is an important current leverage point for change, but the whole process is an evolutionary one of altering the ways that work and the rest of life (family, community, personal relationships, etc.) are integrated. And this leads to a final and broader set of implications of this work.

The historically recent pattern of relationships between work and other spheres of life -- the family, community, education, etc. -- has three key elements: the segregation of personal and family life from work life with work taking priority, and so increasing the conflict between work and the rest of life; the emphasis on individual achievement and material success; and the assumption that to achieve, individuals and companies have to be ruthlessly competitive. Accepting this as the conventional wisdom makes it possible to ignore the negative consequences of the pattern on family and community life.

This pattern is associated with serious marital and other family problems; with what is happening to the next generation, with elder care, and with community problems. It also creates the gendered world as we know it, where women are disadvantaged in the public arena, and men are disadvantaged in their personal lives. We believe that it is not the only way to organize the relationship between work and personal life and in reporting on the study at Xerox, we indicate other possibilities that are more gender equitable and may have positive societal impact. Looking from the specifics of a particular work situation, it is important that as the other possibilities become understood, the gains are shared not only between employees and employers but also between both and communities (schools, children, health and family care, leisure).

Changing the way we view and act on the connections between work and non-work life could also have a profound effect on the rest of the world. Many developing countries are taking over the old conventional wisdom: segregating work and family life with work taking priority, focusing on individual achievement and material success, and perceiving success as having to come from ruthless competitiveness. This pattern is being exported by the so-called developed world just at a time when some may be beginning to realize that the costs of this way of valuing how we work and play is not worth it -- for individuals, for organizations, or for society.

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